



Addressing Student Anxiety About High-Stakes Writing Tests

by [Shelley A. Saltzman](#), [Kirsten Schaetzel](#), and [Charlotte Wallace](#)

Many students today suffer from anxiety, and the most anxiety-prone activities in school are exams. Exams can produce anxiety in any student, but they can be especially difficult for nonnative speakers of English. Students can become paralyzed when looking at a blank piece of paper or a blank screen. They have prepared for the exam, but when they need to produce an essay or a paragraph to answer a question, they have difficulty combining the information they studied and the academic writing skills they have learned. This article gives insights into how writing anxiety presents in students and how we, as ESL instructors, can better prepare students for written exams.

Writing Anxiety

Writing anxiety has been studied for many years in both native- and nonnative-English-speaking populations. In a seminal 1978 article in the *Journal of Educational Research*, Daly discussed the different written results of students with “high apprehension about writing,” as writing anxiety was then called, and the written results of students with lower apprehension. In his research, he showed that those with high apprehension have poorer writing skills and, therefore, receive lower grades (Daly, 1978, p.11). Because of this, they avoid writing and, because they write less frequently than those with lower apprehension about writing, they have fewer opportunities to develop their writing skills. It is a vicious cycle. Hassan (2001) describes a similar situation with nonnative-English-speaking writers when discussing second language writing anxiety, which he defines as “a general avoidance of writing and of situations perceived by the individuals to potentially require some amount of writing accompanied by the potential for evaluation of that writing” (p. 4).

When students are anxious about their writing, especially on a test, they experience a great deal of difficulty gathering and organizing their thoughts to present in an essay or short answer. Sometimes they cannot think clearly about how and in what order to present their ideas and waffle making decisions about their writing, wasting precious exam time. They are often self-conscious about their writing skills and suffer from nervous tension as they craft their answers on writing tests. When doing writing assignments outside of class, they may procrastinate working on their essays and papers and not plan time to visit a writing lab or sufficiently revise and edit

their work. A hurriedly written piece may not receive as high a grade as a carefully crafted one; thus, when they receive a lower mark on a piece, they feel, once again, that their writing is weak.

How can we help end this cycle?

Addressing Anxiety Through Mindfulness

One way we can help students reduce anxiety is by teaching them mindfulness techniques. Grise (2017) points out that both energy and focus are required to successfully read critically, an essential skill in both studying for and taking exams. Traditional recommendations to get enough sleep, eat well, and exercise through short walks and stretching still apply. However, mindfulness techniques, such as using high energy times of day for deep study or practicing daily breathing exercises to reduce stress, have proven helpful to student performance in high-stress situations (Grise, 2017, pp. 27–28).

Mindfulness can be simply a matter of focusing on a present activity to the exclusion of all other concerns. Last summer, for instance, in Washington University’s intensive legal English program for foreign-trained lawyers, one of our instructors, who is also a yoga teacher, introduced simple yoga exercises to momentarily refocus and refresh. Her students were exceptionally energized and enthusiastic throughout the arduous program. Similarly, Grise (2017, pp. 34–38), in promoting alertness and awareness for law students when studying, atypically presents a series of photos illustrating stretching exercises, most of which could be done while studying at one’s desk, some even unobtrusively during an exam.

In addition to mindfulness, are there other ways we can help students learn to write well on exams in spite of writing anxiety? How can what we teach and practice in classes inform the exam writing experience of students?

Addressing Anxiety Through Familiarity

We can reduce test anxiety by increasing familiarity—familiarity with the test task, the test assessment, and the self-assessment.

Familiarity with the parameters of a test has been shown to reduce anxiety and increase performance (Cizek & Burg, 2006, p. 97). Students who know only that there is a written component to the exam may well panic on test day when presented with an unfamiliar writing task. In general, students will be less nervous if they visit the assessment organization’s website to ascertain in advance whether they will be required to

- integrate information from given reading/aural texts (TOEFL) or draw on their own experience and observation (IELTS),
- evaluate an argument (GED) or construct an argument (GRE), and
- summarize a graph (IELTS) or solve a legal problem (UBE).

Students are often most concerned about what score they will receive on these high-stake examinations. One way to minimize that anxiety is to share with them the methods by which their writing will be assessed. At Columbia, we have found it useful to

- have students examine assessment criteria;
- explain the assessment scale (and any jargon within);
- analyze writing samples together; and
- have students score a set of essays, so that they can demonstrate their understanding.

Such familiarity with test tasks and assessment is most beneficial when coupled with self-assessment. Some students are not as aware of their writing abilities and handicaps as we might hope. Ways to increase that self-knowledge may include asking students to

- indicate their strengths and weaknesses as writers, so that they know where they should focus their attention;
- keep a log of their grammar/lexical errors, so as to detect a pattern of error;
- proofread first and foremost for their three most persistent grammar errors; and
- manage their time during the exam based on their self-assessment. (E.g., if their idea development is strong, but their grammatical accuracy is weak, more time spent proofreading may be warranted and vice versa.)

Addressing Anxiety Through Skill Development

Effective preparation entails not only familiarity, but also skill development. When students feel adequately prepared for an examination, their anxiety level drops (Cizek & Burg, 2006, p. 97). Cizek and Burg (2006) go as far as to say an instructor's failure to teach students an assessed skill, in the case of high-stake state examinations, is "professionally indefensible" (p. 98).

At Columbia, we noticed that if students have already acquired skill in paraphrase and refutation, text-based argument exams seem less intimidating. Students appear reassured knowing that they have developed the requisite lexical and syntactic skills to perform well on the exam. Some of our faculty have found it beneficial to utilize online tools to teach test-takers how to

- use collocations (See [COCA](#)),
- increase their lexical sophistication (See [Word and Phrase](#)), and
- strengthen their grammar (See [The Writer's Diet](#)).

For international students sitting for the Uniform Bar Exam, practicing advocacy on complex test questions can relieve tension and improve focus and performance, a strategy that may help in taking other tests as well. Advocacy engages the reader in controversial or contentious topics. By focusing on one perspective, the reader-advocate not only sharpens his or her perception, but in turn more clearly distinguishes his or her opponent's side (Grise, 2017, pp. 28–33).

In Washington University's legal English writing course, we have adapted Ramsfield's (2005) hypothetical controversy between a group of veterans and two public interest groups (parents and environmentalists) to simulate a modified version of the complex Multistate Performance Test

(MPT) on the Uniform Bar Exam, offered in more than 30 states. On the 90-minute MPT, test-takers must efficiently prioritize different sources to solve a legal problem. In our modified activity, with weekly writing assignments spaced over 3 weeks, students are assigned to be advocates for either the veterans, who want to place a tank in the park as a war memorial, or the parents/environmentalists, who oppose this plan for safety and environmental reasons.

To determine their side's legal support, both must prioritize 1) a statute listing the vehicles prohibited in the park, and 2) two short cases, one prohibiting a vehicle not on the statutory list, and the other allowing an unlisted vehicle. Students must compare and contrast the facts in each case to the facts of their own hypothetical situation to make their arguments. They argue first orally in pairs in class, then hone their arguments and refute their opponents' claims in their final written draft.

Conclusion

Thus, mindfulness, familiarity, and skill development may reduce our students' apprehension, allowing them to perform more successfully on high-stakes writing exams. By learning multiple ways to address their writing anxiety, our students may not only receive higher test scores, but may also stop avoiding classes and careers that require some writing.

References

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